

# American Stasis?

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Over the last century, markers of electoral system development in the advanced democracies have included extension of the franchise to women, direct election (rather than appointment) of representatives to upper chambers, elimination of poll taxes, and some degree of public financing, among others. Additionally, many countries have moved toward accommodation of “more voices and more choices” through reduction of barriers to entry for new parties. The United States has not yet made progress in the latter respect, but reformers often assume that further development of our system—in the direction of full multi-party democracy—is just a matter of time.

This article will question that assumption. It will consider the possibility that electoral system reform, along with much else on the progressive agenda, may succumb to a general American stasis. The consequences of this might argue for a strategic reorientation or, at minimum, discussions now about how to relate to the daunting circumstances facing our movement in the decades ahead.

## **Opposition to progress by the dominant parties**

Plurality voting systems (“winner-take-all,” “first-past-the-post”), such as those used in the vast majority of jurisdictions in the United States, make it notoriously difficult for alternative parties to succeed. According to Wikipedia: “The system of single-member districts with plurality victors tends to produce two large political parties. The reason: there is a premium to combine small parties into big ones in order to edge out competitors. If one of the two large parties splits ... the election is thrown to the other party, the one that hangs together. In countries with proportional representation there is not such a great premium on forming two large parties, and that contributes to multi-party systems.”

Not surprisingly, proposals to revamp the electoral system, to reform ballot access laws, or to level the playing field in regard to campaign financing have been vigorously opposed by the Republicans and Democrats. The parties that have dominated American politics for so long have done everything in their power to maintain and even to *raise* barriers to entry [reference John Rensenbrink's commentary on Theresa Amato's book *Grand Illusion: the Myth of Voter Choice in a Two-Party Tyranny* in last fall's issue, Number 20, of *Green Horizon*].

Decades ago the Populist, Socialist, Progressive, and Farmer-Labor parties managed to elect a significant number of their members to state legislatures and dozens to the US Congress, but victories by third party candidates in races above the local level have become a rarity in recent years.

## **Few third parties even endure**

Under these circumstances, few alternative parties have even managed to endure for more than a handful of electoral cycles. It's a tribute to the Libertarian Party that it has survived now for almost forty years. However, during that entire period it has never elected a single member to the US Congress. Only twelve Libertarians have been elected to state legislatures (none in the last ten years; and in some cases the elected candidates happened to be members of the Libertarian Party while running under a ballot denomination of Republican or Independent).

The Green Party has shown staying power since its foundational meeting in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1984. It enjoyed a surge of interest after the controversial Nader for President campaign of 2000 but, other than that, its growth in terms of number of members, candidates, and electoral victories has been modest, at best.

The Reform Party was established in the wake of Ross Perot's relative success in the 1992 presidential election. With Perot as its standard-bearer again in 1996, it garnered eight percent of the vote. The impacts of those races and the Green Party campaign of 2000 generated some hopeful talk about the development of a four-party system in this country. The idea was that there could be a major party of the left, the Democrats, and a minor party of the left, the Greens, alongside a major party of the right, the Republicans, and a minor party of the right, the Reform Party. If there was ever any real momentum in that direction, it didn't last. The Reform Party imploded rather quickly, as had been the case with so many others in recent memory (the Labor Party, the New Party, the Citizens Party, the 21st Century Party).

The Greens and the Libertarians continue to endure, and they make notable breakthroughs from time to time, especially in non-partisan races for local, municipal, offices. But when they enter the arena of partisan competition with Democrats and Republicans it is rare that a Green or Libertarian candidate exceeds three or four percent of the vote (some exceptions can be pointed to, such as the impressive Green Party gubernatorial campaigns of Jonathan Carter in Maine in 2002 [9.3% of the vote], Rich Whitney in Illinois in 2006 [10.4%], Pat La Marche in Maine in 2006 [9.6%]). Only one Green candidate for a state legislative seat, John Eder in Portland, Maine, has won more than a single term in office (2002 and 2006). For the most part, in races above the municipal level, alternative party candidates tend to be consigned to the political margins.

## **Why is the US Green Party making so little progress?**

The resonance of Green politics worldwide could be viewed as a basis for arguing that the US Green Party is bound to break through, eventually. Its Canadian counterpart has been growing steadily in the last several years despite the fact that there is a winner-take-all electoral system in that country. England, too, uses plurality voting, but the Green Party there garnered 8.7% of the vote in last June's European Parliament (EP) elections—up from 6.1% in 2004. Two of their candidates were elected to the EP and the Greens polled the *highest* vote totals in three cities, receiving 31% in Brighton, 26% in Oxford, and 25% in Norwich. As of this writing (Feb. 2010) it is looking as if, in the upcoming May 6 general election, the leader of the British Green Party, Caroline Lucas, might win the Brighton Pavilion seat in the House of Commons, a seat now held by the Labour Party. This would be an important achievement, a first seat in the national parliament, for a party that dates its inception from 1973.

When we look at countries with proportional representation systems the reports are even more encouraging. The Green Party of Germany, for example, now has a solid, consistent base of 10-12% of the electorate. The big story across the continent after last June's elections was the "Green wave." On June 7 Reuters quoted Thomas Klau at the Center for European Reform saying: "The rise of the Green Party has been striking. The Greens are the one political force in the European Union that has been closest to creating a true European party, a true European political movement ... with a message that is strong and plausible."

Moreover, outside of the political sphere "greening" (cultivating lower-impact lifeways) is clearly becoming a major cultural phenomenon. It would seem logical—and, in fact, is the case in many countries—that the political parties giving electoral expression to this phenomenon would thrive. So the question has to be asked: Why is the US Green Party making so little progress?

For an explanation, we may have to look beyond the "spoiler" problem, cooptation, and fundraising disadvantages. After all, Green parties in other countries with plurality voting systems face those same issues yet are managing to grow. The possibility needs to be considered that, *due to special circumstances*, neither the Greens nor any other alternative party will ever break through here in the United States.

America may have once been known as the "cradle of democracy," but progress toward an open and modern multi-party system, a worldwide trend over the last century, has been notably absent here. If third party activists in this country have the feeling of being stuck-in-place year after year, it may be because they are operating within a society that is, in fact, generally stuck-in-place at a fundamental level.

### **Egypt, Rome, Spain, England . . . America . . .**

There is an historical pattern whereby the most dominant and successful imperial powers tend to atrophy over time into a state of lassitude and complacency—unable to resolve festering problems such as imbalances between consumption and production, intractable inequality, breakdown of community, disregard for limits. This is the central theme of Paul Kennedy's 1987 treatise, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*.

Americans who came of age during the 1960s know how clearly the imperative for fundamental social change in this country was articulated at that time. Forty years later, not only has there been no "revolution" or "cultural transformation," it is debatable whether progress or retrogression has characterized the ensuing period:

- . disparities of wealth and income have kept growing;
- . the country has not been able to modernize its healthcare system;
- . the fiscal crises of the national and state governments have tended to intensify over time;
- . the precarious dependency upon foreign sources of energy persists;
- . neither Republican nor Democratic administrations have dared to address the issue of reducing the country's bloated and unnecessary military expenditures;
- . the two establishment parties command less and less loyalty as the decades pass, but electoral alternatives fail to get any traction.

These are signs of ossification. The upper and middle classes are so focused on retaining their relative material advantages that they tend toward skepticism and resistance of even the most tepid proposals for systemic change. And the folly of aspiring to imperial dominance is so persistent, so ingrained at this point, that the United States of America, as a nation-state and a society, could conceivably be beyond reformability.

Maybe the onset of what Richard Heinberg calls Peak Everything (unsustainable levels of urbanization, technological complexity, energy consumption, resource depletion, debt expansion) will jolt this country out of its rut and open up pathways toward revitalization. In that case the prospects for multi-party democracy here might finally start to improve. But we need to consider the possibility that this country, uniquely suffering from having its head in the clouds of grandiosity and dominance, will just simply fail to ever shake loose from its complacency and inertia.

### **A dual mission**

As especially hard as it might be to work within the American context, Greens have a special responsibility to try to succeed here. If there can be real hope for this country (as opposed to Obama's vacuous and now fading hope), it lies with the prospect that a rejuvenating alternative politics will ultimately prevail. And the opening up of our electoral system would be beneficial to the entire global geopolitical landscape. America is currently the great cultural trendsetter, so a breakthrough for Green politics in this country would advance the worldwide movement immeasurably.

But realism and a long-term perspective are needed for the special circumstances we are facing. And if it comes to pass that this country goes into terminal decline while still offering only two choices on its ballots . . . so be it. While continuing to resist the empire and continuing to fight for full multi-party democracy, Greens may need to shift priorities toward helping to build the new society—locality by locality, region by region—within the shell of the prevailing imperial center as it crumbles. In fact, Greens can and ought to be doing both at the same time: trying to open up the electoral system while also creating alternative institutions . . . constructing lifeboats . . .

Discouragement is not an option. There's so much critical work to be done!